



NORTH-HOLLAND

Certifying Futurists

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Being a professional is a great deal. Think about doctors, lawyers, and accountants. The money just rolls in. Customers, or for professionals the proper term, clients, pretty much know what they are buying. They have pre-assurance of the quality and the service to be rendered, and all of this is paid for with lush, if not too lavish, fees. Other professions, such as the clergy, enjoy less money, are less often recertified, and have fewer saleable skills, but they enjoy high prestige within the community of clients that they serve.

Certification is central in most professions. One graduates from medical school or law school, or into one of the other big money-making professions and goes on to continuing education. The result is a splendid wall of certificates to mark the refurbished and expanding capabilities over a career. The obvious conclusion, at least to some futurists, is that if we are to ever make it as a widely recognized and respected profession we have to have certification. Certification also carries with it the responsibility for self-policing, to reduce fraud and to punish bad actors.

The issue of certification highlights three points of view—enthusiasm, indifference, and hostility. Most futurists probably fall into the middle category, but the people in the middle rarely carry the day in the long run. Let us look at why and the why not.

The argument for certifying futurists comes from futurists who are concerned about the quality of the work of other people flying under the same flag. There is no doubt that there are snake oil salesmen. There is shallow work. Hyperbolic, or overly dramatic claims are made. Distorted information and data are used and questionable conclusions about mid- and long-term outcomes are prevalent. Certifying would at least help the buyers or users of futurists' services to use the sensible buyers' slogan, caveat emptor. Aside from annoyance with low-quality work, there is also the question of establishing expectations for successful performance of a futurist's work, which should be valuable in recruiting clients and building assurance that the work will have some practical significance in the economic, the policy, or the intellectual marketplace. As already noted, the economic value of certification has to be a latent, if not an overt, point in favor of certification. Also the psychological boost in being certified would be a comfort to many.

At the other extreme, those who are opposed to certification are likely to be older futurists who have sidled into the activity out of something else—engineering, sociology, journalism, no particular field at all, or perhaps out of sheer opportunism. How could they be certified? How could they ever be made more legitimate? Another objection comes out of the limited scope of most futurists' work. Using the taxonomy of futurists developed years ago by Michael Marien, editor of *Futures Survey*, there are futurists who are plenary, that is, broad in scope and comprehensive in outlook. He estimated at one time that there are about 20 of them. There are another 200 or so who work full time at futures, and earn their income totally or nearly totally in exploring the future. Then there are others who have a more limited view, either specialists in a field who become futurized, or futurists who become specialized in some field. For example, one might be in the energy sector and gradually evolve into a working futurist just by the pursuit of interests in the world of energy. Similarly one might be a futurist and find that employment or a succession of jobs builds skill and reputation in a particular area, such as food, automotives, or international affairs, and gradually one specializes in that futures field. How do you stack up the plenary and general-purpose futurists against the more specialized ones? There are other people who from time to time dabble in the future or write one book or an article or two. They may turn out superb work, or it may be mediocre or prosaic. How could they be certified, if at all?

A large portion of those who oppose certification see it as unnecessary, rejecting the notion that it has any value for themselves or anyone else. Others see that certification mechanisms would be too difficult to develop or so cumbersome or unfair to implement that it is not worth pursuing.

Let us assume, however, that certification is worthwhile and explore how to do it. First is the division of labor. We see futurists falling into two broad categories. The academic futurists who by definition are associated with colleges and universities, often are broad in their scope of interests. Others tend to the future of a particular field such as business or only have a primarily historical interest in the future. They do interesting work, and they write useful articles and books. They less frequently consult or do fee-for-service work. The second and larger category are applied futurists, which includes consultants on the future, government futurists, and others who are institutionalized in business or in trade associations. There is a third group who are primarily speakers about the future and those who are primarily writers about the future, appealing to a popular as opposed to a professional market. For now I categorize them as applied futurists.

It gets a bit sticky when you consider the status of people who have written one fine book about the future and then return to their more usual career as an historian or engineer or something else. Certification may be unwanted and irrelevant to them. Working with two categories—the academic and the applied—let us consider what the strengths or capabilities are of each. Surely there will be some overlap, but broadly speaking one can expect average differences between the academic and the applied futurists.

Academic Futurists

Academic futurists are likely to have, as in any other academic field, a comprehensive and comparative view of the history of the field, and a broad awareness of contemporary activities and their origins and relationships. The academic will understand the history of ideas about the future, schools of thought, their origins, and evolution. Academics are less likely to have strength in understanding the principles of future studies, and in being aware of the range of methodologies as well as methods that futurists use in the pursuit of their activities. The academics are likely to publish books and journal articles appealing to an intellectual community and to a coterie of fellow academics.

Central to all academic activities is teaching. Part of that teaching is the production of intellectual descendants who enter the field as either academics or practitioners.

Another strength one expects from the academics is the critical function, being able to look at new work, new ideas, new concepts, and evaluate them in historic and contemporary terms, for intellectual and methodological soundness.

Applied Futurists

Applied futurists are a different kettle of fish. They primarily work directly or indirectly in the service of an organization that will use their work. This is best seen with consulting futurists or those working in business or in government. The client can expect the applied futurist to be particularly strong in methods and techniques, although not necessarily using the full tool kit. The applied futurist is also likely to be more or less effective in collecting, organizing, and interpreting data about trends, potential developments, discontinuities, and so forth. For the truly effective applied futurist, communication in all forms—oral, written, electronic, and graphic—is a central skill of expanding importance.

The user orientation is the central feature of the applied futurist. He or she is more or less out to change people's beliefs, attitudes and ultimately their actions, not necessarily in an ideological or doctrinaire way, but in a way that is utilitarian.

The personal characteristics of a good applied futurist are:

- A grasp of the trends in society, from the point of view of their continuation and possible disruption from discoveries, invention, crises, or other events;
- A willingness to forecast;
- A sense of more than one viable, plausible, and complex alternative future;
- Comfort in dealing with complexity and with no penchant for simplifying it so as to dissociate analysis from practical affairs;
- A sense of values of self and others which serves two purposes: 1) sorting out the important from the unimportant in making forecasts, and 2) as a means of identifying social and institutional goals;
- Interpersonal empathy is crucial to anticipating future consequences of forces driving change;
- Imagination;
- Curiosity;
- A theory of social change;
- Optimism, without which looking to the future is not worth undertaking;
- A sense of history and a willingness to draw on both personal and formal history;
- An enthusiasm for working in fields in which one has no previous formal training;
- The ability to take and dispense sharp criticism without animus or hard feelings;
- Skill in using different tools and techniques;
- The ability to keep a broad open mind about the subject under study while at the same time when necessary achieving closure and getting on with conclusions;
- The ability and desire to write and speak or otherwise communicate clearly and tersely;
- Being comfortable in team work; and
- A sense of responsibility for influencing the future on a large or small scale.

The applied futurist also is often, but not always, caught up in problems of confidentiality and proprietary information. This is a most striking difference between the applied and the academic futurist. That proprietary and confidential element comes out of the nature of being a service provider and having to become intimately familiar with the business, organizational, or institutional plans of the client. Therefore, one is confronted with the question of how to honor that special and valuable knowledge.

Both the professional and the applied futurists share some common features. One can expect each to have broad areas of interest in demography, economics, science, technology, engineering, and cultural, social, and institutional matters. The mix and the composition of that range of knowledge vary among both the academics and the applied, depending upon their history and professional interests. They each have some principles under which they operate. The academic may try to lay down methodological principles. The applied futurist may be more concerned with professional principles, that is, such matters as integrity, proprietary information, the sale of same information to multiple clients, and so on. The principles affecting applied futurism to a large extent are problems that have to do with the sale of intellectual services and property, independence, and integrity.

As a practicing futurist who has been both an academic and an applied futurist in the service of business and government, I emphasize the following three principles as underlying futures work.

1. We can see the future to an extent that is useful.
2. We can intervene to make desirable futures more likely to occur and the undesirable futures less likely to occur. These two principles are celebrations of human intelligence and human efficacy, respectively.
3. We have the moral obligation to use the capabilities to anticipate and to influence, i.e., the first two principles.

Credentialing usually carries with it some formal commitment to an ethical code. The futures group at the University of Houston-Clear Lake has developed a code of ethics for futurists, reproduced here from the presentation at the World Futures Society meeting in Chicago on July 20, 1998. It is their Draft 1, of July 1, 1998, and should be viewed as open to revision and clarification.

Preamble

Futurists should be guided by a deep conviction of the worth and dignity of current and future generations and recognize the special responsibility they carry as professional futurists.

Ethical principles due to the unique nature of futures research:

Consider all stakeholders including future generations and other life forms.

Reflect on and communicate both anticipated and unanticipated consequences of forecasts and plans on affected individuals and groups.

Maximize benefit and minimize harm to individual freedom and self-determination, the public good, the health of the planet and its species, and the welfare of future generations.

Ethical principles that futurists share with other professionals:

Disclose/acknowledge and offer to withdraw where conflict of interest may exist or when one's impartiality may be affected.

Formally acknowledge/cite the related work of others.

Maintain confidentiality.

Accurately represent qualification, the limitations of expertise, and the constraints of assumptions.

Preserve the good reputation of the discipline and its practitioners and strive to increase its respect and recognition.

Represent all information and conclusions honestly and truthfully.

Use the best approach and method within the time and resources allowed.

Continuously develop and improve one's skill and competence.

At first reading, one may declare it to be good and useful stuff. However, a second reading shows some serious difficulties with it in pursuing the futures enterprise. First is the ethical principle, seen as either a plea for consideration of all life forms, presumably in a positive light. For example, I hold *staphylococcus aureus* in very low regard and wish to see it eliminated, and have even less respect for the flu virus. I have limited enthusiasm for clams while recognizing that people enjoy eating them. Furthermore, the real problem is "considering" any of the animals or plants. Because we have no ready way to communicate with them, that puts us in the position of either speaking on their behalf, with the criteria for doing that undeveloped, or speaking about them merely as instrumentalities of our own goals and objectives.

The second principle of reflecting and communicating both anticipated and unanticipated consequence is most desirable but in many futurists' works, we see virtually no attention given to the unanticipated consequences. Even less to those unanticipated consequences on a longer time frame. On the other hand, I doubt that the authors really mean anticipated or unanticipated but more properly they mean planned and unplanned. Much of the futures literature that does deal with unplanned consequences has a strong element of the hysterical uni-dimensional and is bereft of any subtlety in terms of likelihood, remedies, or responses as the anticipated consequences unfold. A more telling ethical principle would be to avoid such enthusiasm or hysteria in looking at the planned and unplanned consequences. But that again raises questions as to meaning. Metaphorically for me the operational fluid of a futurist should be ice water not steam.

The third ethical principle is too embracing. There are groups whose self-determination and freedom I am 100% in favor of restricting or even eliminating, such as terrorists, street thugs, violent criminals, white collar criminals, monopolists, and on and on and on. I am really not in favor of all the species of the planet. I would love to scuttle kudzu, and do in the malaria plasmodium, as well as the Norwegian rat and the three common species of cockroach. The proposed principles are too shortsighted and ideologically driven, without much consideration for subtlety.

Some of the ethical principles shared with other professionals raise difficulties. For example, "accurately present qualifications, the limitations of expertise, and the constraints of assumptions. No problem with the qualifications but the limitations of one's expertise is interesting. I find myself repeatedly moving into fields in which there is no futures expertise and therefore deal with clients in a way that we with them or for them generate expertise about the futures in the field. We do this by bringing to the situation the tools, techniques, and conceptual frameworks of futurists to create that expertise. Announcing constraints on assumptions is difficult to do because the most deep-seated assumptions are ideological and may be outside the awareness of the people who hold them most tightly. For example, adherence to a free market or the belief that democracy is intrinsically better than other forms of government.

The next proposed ethical principle, preserving the good reputation of the discipline and of its practitioners has built into it the notion that it is a discipline and that most of the practitioners merit a good reputation. Those two points are the bases for considering certification.

Let us illustrate the problem of any professional ethical principles.

Consider one that the Clear Lake group did not propose but that seems appropriate, the Hippocratic principle of "Do no harm." As I see it, many futurists are and ought to be in the business of doing tremendous harm, to expose antisocial factors, groups and activities, which are or will restrain or constrain human development. Futurists need a calculus of outcomes that is much more complex than superficially obvious banners such as "Do no harm."

Now let us turn to the question of certification itself. How would it be done? Following the procedures in other fields, for those just entering the field, one desirable certificate would be an academic degree. This is now practical from at least two places in the United States—The University of Houston at Clear Lake and the University of Hawaii. But many people are entering the field without academic training. Degrees are likely, however, to become a more significant part of certification. Most futurists now enter through what amounts to an apprentice system, an apprentice system that oscillates somewhere between self-taught and learning the trade under a guiding hand. That apprentice system also applies to the academics because few of them come forth ready to undertake explorations of the future of significant issues any more than an engineer comes forth ready to design a spacecraft or a physician ready to do biomedical research. The system of academic certification has to be augmented by some kind of test and evaluation by established members of the futures community. Skip over for the moment how one could identify such a certifying body and assume that the certifying body exists. It is likely to want several things. First, a curriculum vitae emphasizing the futures activities of the subject; second, documentation of futures work performed, including a bibliography of activities, whether published publicly or only available on an institutional basis; and third, some indication of the time in the service of futures activities. All of this suggests that the certification may lead to classes of first-, second-, and third-degree futurists based upon the extent of career, scope of activities, and the overall volume and quality of production. However, documentation will not be enough. There needs to be some kind of formal testing. The best tests would consist of both written and orals, running perhaps one to two days for the candidate. Let me suggest some content for the written and oral portions for both academic and applied futurists. The certification test questions are only indicative of the scope of coverage.

TESTING APPLIED FUTURISTS

1. Select two of the four methodologies listed below and define each. Describe the pros and cons, strengths and weaknesses of each and their ranges of applications. Outline a specific practical situation in which each method that you have selected would be appropriate. Include in that discussion how one would proceed to use the technique, what resources would be called for, and what time and people power would be necessary to implement it.

1. Morphological box
2. Scenarios
3. Futures wheel
4. Trend analysis

2. Imagine that you are a futurist in the employ of the French perfume industry and you have been asked to undertake a study over the next three months of the future of the perfume industry in the next three decades. You have about two-and-a-half person years of work at your disposal for this task. Lay out a study plan.

TESTING ACADEMICS

1. Some people see the origins of modern futurism in the work of the Marquis de Condorcet. Please outline his principal claims to such a position. Critique his contributions and his pre-science, both from a methodological point of view and from the point of view of the validity of his forecasts.
2. What are the principal limitations on contemporary futures methodology? What criteria should some new methodology be directed at meeting?
3. Select from the following list of prominent futurists two or no more than three and compare and contrast their contributions to the field of futures.
4. Recognizing that future study is neither new nor limited to western tradition, although it may have its greatest strength there, take two nonwestern cultures and define how futures is explored traditionally and currently in those cultural contexts.
5. What are the primary differences in the way the future is explored in France, England, and Germany?
6. Who has been the most important contributor in the United States and in France to contemporary futurism? In 500 words or fewer outline the person's contribution and your sustaining argument.

Getting Started

Should there be any real pressure for certification, obviously one or two organizations—the World Futures Study Federation or the World Future Society—could be primary instruments for that by some process of nomination or voting. For example, in the Encyclopedia of the Future there is an inventory of 100 most prominent futurists today. One could select a panel of “grand old men” of the field from that and have them begin the certifying process, agreeing on methods, techniques, goals, and objectives. One could anticipate, thereby, in the world population of futurists undertaking a program of certifying 25 to 50 futurists per year from around the world. That would be a reasonable chore and would lead gradually to a useful certification process. One could then set up training programs for those who would aspire to that status. One could then bring more of the certified futurists into the process of certification so that within a period of five years one should be able to certify with this expanding oil drop strategy, perhaps 100 Class A futurists, several hundred Class B, the journeyman and Class C, the novice futurist.

Certifying academic futurists may turn out to be undesirable and impractical, because most academic futurists are not plenary in their scope of interests. They tend to be associated with a department or a professional interest, which has stimulated their futures concern. Furthermore, the academic typically has boundless latitude and enormous freedom in the classroom as to what is presented. Therefore, the certification of academics might really be limited to those who choose to enter the world of the speaking platform, or consulting, or to those who move into part-time activity in the world of applied futures.

With the expectation that formal academic programs of future studies will expand, there is the need to consider certifying academic programs. To the best of my knowledge, neither of the two academic programs mentioned earlier has been certified by any outside group. It would be desirable to have a panel of futurists, much along the lines already described for certifying individuals with the responsibility of reviewing, evaluating, and recommending program elements as part of the process of certifying futures programs.

Additional Considerations

Certification often is successful when there is the threat of or the real force of law behind the process. Examples are the continuing education for lawyers and physicians and of some engineers. Many organizations have a substantial base in engineering talent with only two or three among the whole force of engineers legally qualified (i.e., certified to sign off on a project or a particular piece of work). No immediate threats to human well-being exists in the domain of futurists. Therefore, that force of law or the threat of regulation is absent. That blunts any pressure for certification.

Ideology is a critical concern in the exploration of the future. Many people explore the future as a way of sustaining their preconceptions about what the world should be like. Unfortunately, some of those people who are involved in advocacy futurism either are so confident of their own righteousness, or so oblivious of the fact that they are ideologically driven to have questionable preconceptions that they fail to recognize the ideology shaping their work. In order to help users or buyers of their service, or the public in general, to recognize that they are advocates their underlying goals or assumptions should be made explicit. The status of the advocacy futurists presents knotty problems in terms of certification. They may be fully technically and methodologically capable. They may be well trained and have years of experience. But the flaw in their approach to the future may be that they know the answers before they fully understand the question.

As mentioned earlier, certification often leads to higher income. That factor needs careful consideration in any system of certification. The letters CPA, MD, or CAE (Certified Association Executive) are important brand labels provided by a certification process. If the equivalent of that form of branding in the emerging profession of the study of the future could be established it would lead to higher incomes in the field. In some sectors there are competing brands based on different certifying mechanisms. Those competing brands have different value. In exploring the needs of certification, attention to potential economic consequences of being or not being certified would be telling.

Conclusions

At this point the reader should have a fair sense of the pros and cons in the certification of futurists. It is only fair that I indicate my position. One driver that is internal to the group called futurists is improving the quality of the work of other futurists. Driving up the standards for qualifying may be desirable, but it may also be that those matters are and will continue to be handled well by the intellectual and economic marketplaces. It is not at all clear that shoddy work has any great effects, good or bad, or that it is widely circulated. Furthermore, the economic benefits of certification, as already mentioned, need to be explored and from the point of view of those internal to the field. Will it raise incomes?

An external consideration influencing certification is the expanding market. The users, whose explicit needs have not yet been met by futurists, raises the question of what should they be buying, from whom, with what degree of confidence, and mostly, what awareness of risks. Certification could help those people at least to get started in examining the future of their concerns.

In the absence of any unequivocal effects on the immediate health, safety, or security of people, an institution's primary driver to professional certification is absent. Therefore, I am not strongly in favor of a move toward certification. It may be worthwhile for one of the two main futures societies to survey its membership, particularly its professional membership, and the current and potential client community to learn whether there is any anticipated value in certification. That society could then form a group of widely recognized senior futurists to explore the matter in detail.